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ABSTRACT

Conflict management has become an integral part of a headmaster's tasks. Headmasters are not required to suppress or resolve conflict, but to manage it. Since 1976, conflict in black schools has increased, and headmasters have had to manage serious and dangerous situations. Unfortunately, there has been little research in conflict management in "unrest situations" and in "normal" conflict situations. The sources of conflict fall into three main categories: personal behavioral, structural, and communication. There are eight types of conflict: intrapersonal, interpersonal, individual versus group, individual versus organization, group versus group, organization versus organization, strategic, and structural. Conflict management methods include domination, avoidance, compromise, and collaboration. Research shows that in normal situations, personal behavior is the cause of more than half of all conflicts; structural and communication factors cause the remainder. Collaboration and accommodation are chosen most often as conflict-management methods, followed by domination, compromise, and avoidance. Conflict management in unrest situations requires a unique and often immediate response, whereas conflict in the normal school setting does not. All headmasters should receive training in educational management and specifically conflict management. Headmasters should also know educational law, employ a conflict manager, and train teachers in conflict management. (Contains 14 references.) (JPT)

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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AT SCHOOL : AN UNAVOIDABLE TASK

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the handling of conflict by South African headmasters. The reducing and resolving of conflict are discussed with reference to actual conflict situations.

The actuality of the theme "conflict in schools" is emphasized by reports in the mass media as well as in research reports. The phenomenon is universal and calls for basic research and practical solutions on the institutional level. Conflict management at school has become an unavoidable task of the headmaster and part of his daily workload (task). "Conflict exists wherever human interaction occurs" Grace, 1972). It should be considered a natural phenomenon which might vary in frequency, intensity and duration, but which is part of human existence and can either destroy or construct (Achoka, 1990:45). The task of headmasters is not to suppress or resolve all conflict but to manage it in such a way that the positive aspects are maximized and the negative aspects minimized.

Since 1976 the scene in schools for blacks has changed drastically due to the emergence of unrest (Van der Westhuizen, Steyn & Mosoge, 1991:31). In the mean time the situation has changed for the worse and headmasters are often called upon to deal (manage) with serious and dangerous conflict situations. Although conflict also occurs in schools other than schools for blacks, the difference in seriousness necessitates a different approach. The literature, however, provides very few guidelines for conflict management in schools in unrest situations, which in essence exhibit characteristics of crisis situations (Mosoge, 1989).

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Protest against the status quo reflects a general mood in the country especially that amongst the black youth. "This mood of protest finds expression in schools in the form of unrest and student activism" (Van der Westhuizen, et al, 1991:31). Vandalism, crime and violence have become a common feature of community life. The school as a community institution reflects to a certain extent the features of the community at large. School boycotts, stay aways, harassment of teachers, damaging of public and private property etc. do not contribute towards a learning environment which is conducive to education (DET, 1990:1-16). As the situation deteriorates in some areas it has become imperative to resolve the conflict in order to establish a sound base for school-based education.

2. THE QUESTION IS:

How does a headmaster handle conflict **"in unrest situations"** and in **"normal"** conflict situations?

3. THE GOAL OF THE DISSERTATION

The goal is to compare the different conflict resolution methods/techniques implemented in different sets of circumstances so that possible guidelines could be drawn for future use by headmasters.

4. A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As stated by many authors, conflict is part of human existence. Where individuals or groups with incompatible goals, values and perceptions are simultaneously competing for scarce resources and/or opportunities in order to achieve their goals, conflict is likely to emerge. (Zeigler et al, 1983:35; Stoner, 1982:407; Flippo & Munsinger, 1982:394).

Sources of conflict differ. Three main categories of sources can be distinguished, namely:

* personal behaviourial factors
* structural and

* communication factors, (Achoka, 1990:44-45, Van der Merwe, 1991:22). Several subcategories exist which are not elaborated on.

The following types of conflict are distinguised:

* Intrapersonal conflict;
* interpersonal " ;
* individual *vs* group conflict;
* individual *vs* organization conflict;
* group *vs* group conflict (intergroup);
* organization *vs* organization conflict;
* strategic conflict and
* structural conflict.

(Bondesio & De Witt, 1990:317-321; Stoner & Wankel, 1986:382-383; Erickson, 1985: 290; Kroon (ed), 1986:534-535).

In research on this subject it is often difficult to make a clear-cut classification as conflict types tend to be intertwined and are usually in a process of development. It may start as one type and end up as something different. This statement is also true of the categorization of sources of conflict especially between sub-categories.

If one takes a close look at the methods/techniques for conflict management as they are executed in real life situations one realises that any so-called watertight classification does not live up to expectations. More than one conflict management method/technique are applied. At best a dominant technique could be identified at a certain point in time.

The conflict management methods which can be distinguished, are dominating, avoiding, compromising, smoothing and collaboration some of them are more prominent in certain types of conflict situations than others. Although most authors do not make a clear distinction between methods and techniques, a difference is distinguishable.

Methods are also referred to as conflict management styles. The conflict management method/style is executed in terms of a series of techniques which are

conducive to the specific style (method). For example, the method/style of collaboration is executed by means of techniques like consultation, emphasising mutual goals, seeking mutual (common) ground and highlighting the fact etc. Domination which is associated with an authoritarian approach is usually accompanied by techniques like lack of discussion, emphasising policy and regulations, demanding immediate obedience, threatening with actions, demanding in stead of requesting etc.

This distinction is difficult to make in empirical research conducted by means of a questionnaire and usually needs a follow up qualitative analyses by means of personal interviews.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS OF CONFLICT IN UNREST SITUATIONS

Below the results of research done by Mosoge on conflict management in schools in unrest situations are given. This research was executed by means of an interview questionnaire. The respondents were headmasters from primary and secondary schools. "These school principals were in charge of approximately 45 000 black children...." (Van der Westhuizen et al, 1991:33) in the Vaal Triangle area of Transvaal.

TABLE 1

ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION TECHNIQUES FOR UNREST SITUATIONS

Types of unrest situations	Resolution methods*				
	D	A	C	S	COL
Pupils *vs* pupils	52,5	15,0	12,5	2,5	17,5
Teachers *vs* HOD**	67,5	-	12,5	17,5	2,5
Teachers *vs* pupils	20,0	17,5	7,5	52,5	2,5
Parents *vs* management	25,0	15,0	7,5	47,5	5,0
Pupils *vs* management	20,0	20,0	2,5	7,5	2,5
Teachers *vs* management	30,0	15,0	37,5	-	17,5
Community conflict	47,5	42,5	10,0	-	-
Interschool conflict	2,5	7,5	32,5	7,5	50,0
Departmental policies	42,5	10,0	20,0	25,0	2,5

* D = dominating, A = avoiding, C = compromising, S = smoothing, Col = collaborating

** HOD - Heads of departments

The results revealed the following: (Van der Westhuizen et al, 1991:34-36):

5.1 Intergroup conflict

* Domination as method to resolve conflict figured prominently in pupils *vs* pupils, (52.5 %), teacher *vs* teacher (67.5 %) and pupils *vs* management (67.5%) unrest situations.
* The occurrence of acts of aggression or physical force in pupils *vs* pupils and pupils *vs* management situations prompted headmasters to resort to domination as conflict method. In less severe conflict situations as portrayed in teachers *vs* heads of departments episodes headmasters surprisingly also chose domination as conflict managing method (67.5 %) which could be indicative of intolerance of headmasters towards any form of insubordination.
* Smoothing was used by 52.5 % of the headmasters for resolving teacher *vs* pupils conflict and by 47.5 % of headmasters for resolving parents *vs* management conflict. As in most cases where smoothing had been applied it served only as a temporary solution to buy time to readdress the problem.
* Compromising was used by 35.5 % of the headmasters to resolve teachers *vs* management conflict but for the remainder compromising did not occur significantly.
* Collaboration was not preferred as a conflict management method in unrest situations.

5.2 Community conflict

* Community conflict refers to conflict within the community which tends to disrupt the school but is as such not related to school matters. Domination was used by 47.5 % of the headmasters and avoiding by 42.5 %.
* When riots in the school took place as a result of community conflict the headmasters called in the police as a last resort after other methods had failed to produce positive results.
* Avoidance was used in cases where a stay away had been imminent and where the headmasters were reluctant to intervene with community actions.

On the one hand they feared victimization by the community and on the other hand they feared that a transgression of departmental policy could lead to punitive measures against them.

5.3 Conflict against departmental policy

* As indicated in Table 1, 42.5 % of the headmasters resolved this type of conflict by using the method of domination.

* Compromising (20.0 %) and smoothing (25.0 %) were also applied by a significant number of headmasters although they could be labelled as inappropriate lines of action since policy is made in the higher echelons of the hierarchy and supposed to be executed by the headmasters. The fact that they acted in the way they did is an indication of the pressure exercised by the community on the headmasters. Since disputes on policy matters resulted in severe disruptions it is understandable why smoothing and compromising had been chosen by a significant number of headmasters. Another fact that contributed to this line of action is the lack of legitimacy that the educational system is experiencing in the black community. (Education Renewal Strategy Discursion document, 1991:17; Star, 15 June 1991:1). It is seen as inferior, an instrument of apartheid, and an instrument to bring about change. In a certain sense the headmasters had to deal with a form of **strategic conflict** where the hidden agenda and powerplay characterized a well planned strategy to stimulate conflict in order to bring about change. The school forms a subsystem in the strategic conflict plan. The slogan "liberation before education" says it all. The so-called conflict against departmental policy is not always the issue. There is something else at stake which lies outside the jurisdiction of the headmaster and even outside the Department of Education's jurisdiction. It is, therefore, no wonder that headmasters resort to the above-mentioned methods. This form of conflict could be labelled as SOCIAL CONFLICT which Rhoodie (1981:6) defines as:

"The collective resistance/opposition of a relatively large number of members of a state society to the existing order. This resistance/opposition develops at least partially outside the formally prescribed institutions of conflict management and leads to the formation of interest groups, whose members believe and accept that:

(a) Institutionalized social inequality harms and reduces their life-chances and basic survival interests.

(b) They are consequently subject to real or potential restraints on their rightful access to society's rewards and resources.

(c) Only relatively radical changes/adjustments in both the formal norm-system, and governmental structure/institutions of authority will help to alleviate/relieve their potential disadvantageous position and

(d) increasing organized publical confrontation with those in power, is their final instrument of negotiation, should the dominant factions/authorities endeavour to maintain the rejected status quo".

5.4 Interschool conflict

* This type of conflict situation was resolved by means of collaboration (50 %) and compromising (32.5 %). This is a significant deviation from the general trend as in these cases domination was implemented only by 2.5 % of the headmasters.

  Interesting to note is that in these cases the headmasters indicated that they would involve pupils in settling the conflict. These were the only situations where they gave such an indication. It must be noted that the pupils were involved in the conflict and that it could also be classified as a form of intergroup conflict and not always as organization *vs* organization conflict.

5.5 Major findings with reference to unrest situations

* All the conflict resolution methods like dominating, avoiding, compromising, smoothing and collaborating are used by the headmasters but in the majority of unrest situations domination is preferred. The evidence indicates an overuse of domination in resolving conflict.

* Collaborating is not preferred as a method for resolving conflict in unrest situations;
* Avoiding as method occurs in almost every type of unrest situation but is not preferred to other methods;
* Compromising as conflict management method occurs in all types of unrest situations and significantly in teacher *vs* management, interschool conflict and departmental policy conflict situations;
* The findings are significant for the management of intergroup conflict in unrest situations, but it is clear that there is neither a single strategy suitable for all situations nor a simple choice to be made by management in unrest situations.

6. RESEARCH RESULTS OF CONFLICT "IN NORMAL SCHOOL-SETTINGS"

Research on conflict in "normal school settings" was done by Van der Merwe (1991). This small scale empirical research consisted of semi-structured interviews with experienced headmasters and revealed as expected, different results. The conflict situations could by no means be typified as unrest situations and the results are not comparable to results obtained in Mosoge's research but the differences in handling the conflict make them significant nevertheless.

6.1 Sources of conflict

* Personal behavioral factors were the source of conflict in more than half of the cases.
* Structural factors were apparent in less than 30 % of the cases, and communication in less than 20 % of the cases.

6.2 Conflict management methods/styles and techniques

Due to the limited scale of the investigation the empirical research was conducted by means of interviews. It was therefore also possible to distinguish between methods and techniques. A qualitative analyses was possible and a second interviews were conducted where necessary.

6.2.1 Methods

* Collaboration and accommodation were chosen in the majority of situations and the outcome thereof were positive.
* Domination was second on the list of methods and in such cases the intensity of conflict was high and the time to respond limited. In a sense this conflict resolving method as in the case of unrest situations, was to be expected.
* Compromising and avoiding were not often chosen as methods and they were seen as short-term solutions.

6.2.2 Techniques

* Smoothing had been used in more than half of the situations as first reaction to conflict but was after a thorough investigation replaced by techniques such as the distribution of relevant information (communication), creative problem solving (generating alternatives in collaboration with the parties involved, choosing between alternatives - joint/participative decision-making etc.) As could be expected the methods of collaboration and compromising were closely associated with the above-mentioned techniques.

* An authoritarian approach was followed in less than 30 % of the cases and in these cases domination was the overall method. In some of these cases the standing policy of the school was challenged or the good order of the school was at stake. In some of these cases immediate reaction was necessary to cope with the situation.

* Behavioural modification was used in most cases were an authoritarian approach was necessary as a first technique to quell the conflict. Behaviour modification is part of a long-term strategy and collaboration with various parties is often necessary to ensure success.

* Other techniques like emphasising mutual goals, improving the communication channels and extension of scarce resources were also used but

usually as second, third or fourth techniques in a series of actions to resolve the conflict.

7. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Unrest situations are unique and call for unique and often immediate responses. Domination seems to be the general trend as a choice of method/style although it is clear that avoiding, smoothing, collaboration and compromising are also chosen depending on the situation.

7.2 Conflict in normal school settings usually does not necessitate an immediate response and avoiding and smoothing as methods buy the headmaster some time for deciding on a more appropriate line of action. This first "line of defence" is not always available in unrest situations and in most cases it is difficult to foresee the conflict and even when it is anticipated there are not much that could be done if the source of the conflict is not within the jurisdiction of the headmaster, or for that matter, within the jurisdiction of the Department of Education.

7.3 It is clear from the research that conflict can be placed on a time continuum where different methods and a series of techniques might be necessary in order to solve the conflict. The mere fact that one deals with human behaviour in a series of complex situations which develop in the course of time, makes it unlikely to find a single or a simple quick fix solution to the choice of method and technique in dealing with conflict.

7.4 Every conflict situation is different and calls for a unique response. Despite the uniqueness of every conflict situation, there are general guidelines that could be followed.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Proper training in educational management and specifically in conflict management is recommended for all headmasters. It is concluded that headmasters should have a thorough knowledge of the nature and source of conflict to enable them to

effectively identify, evaluate and diagnose conflict in order to choose the "best" method and most effective techniques to deal with conflict.

8.2 A thorough knowledge of Educational Law pertaining to a specific country (area, department) must be incorporated in the course.

8.3 Knowledge in itself is not enough and training by means of simulated conflict situations and assistance during real conflict are of paramount importance to ensure a prepared and able conflict manager at school level.

8.4 As conflict is part of human existence, it is apt to occur in normal classroom situations thus necessitating some form of conflict management training in the initial training of teachers.

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